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Aims and Exclusivity

Ema Sullivan-Bissett

Abstract: If belief has an *aim* by being a (quasi) intentional activity, then it ought to be the case that the aim of belief can be *weighed* against other aims one might have. However, this is not so with the putative truth aim of belief: from the first-person perspective, one can only be motivated by truth considerations in deliberation over what to believe (*exclusivity*). From this perspective then, the aim cannot be weighed. This problem is captured by David Owens's Exclusivity Objection to belief having an aim (2003). Conor McHugh (2012; 2013) has responded to this problem by denying the phenomenon of exclusivity and replacing it with something weaker: *demandingness*. If deliberation over what to believe is characterised by *demandingness* and not *exclusivity*, this allows for the requisite weighing of the truth aim. I argue against such a move by suggesting that where non-evidential considerations play a role in affecting what we believe, these considerations merely change the standards required for believing in a particular context, they do *not* provide non-evidential reasons for forming or withholding belief, which are considered *as such* from the deliberative perspective. Exclusivity thus remains, and so too does Owens's objection.

1. Exclusivity

Exclusivity is said to characterise deliberation over what to believe—only truth-related considerations can be motivating reasons. This claim should be read descriptively, as a fact about our belief formation, not as a claim about how one ought to deliberate. McHugh characterises exclusivity thus:

when you deliberate about whether to believe a proposition, *only* considerations you take to be relevant to the truth of that proposition—i.e., evidence—can be motivating reasons for believing the proposition, reasons for which you adopt the doxastic attitude of belief to that proposition. (McHugh 2013: 1118)

To claim exclusivity is not to claim that beliefs are formed exclusively in response to considerations relating to the truth of *p*, rather, it is to claim that 'one cannot *deliberately*, and in full awareness, as it were, let one's beliefs be guided by anything but truth' (Steglich-Petersen 2006: 503). This is not to deny that beliefs can be influenced by non-epistemic factors. Provided that these non-epistemic factors are not acknowledged *as reasons to believe* by the deliberator, exclusivity does not rule out their influencing the content or fixation of deliberative beliefs.

An account of belief should explain why when we deliberate over what to believe, we can only take truth-related considerations into account. Alternatively,

an account of belief should have the resources to show that exclusivity does not in fact characterise our belief formation, and so does not pose an explanatory burden to belief theorists. In this paper I will be considering a version of the second strategy.

2. The Truth Aim Teleological Account and Exclusivity

The teleological account of belief holds that belief is constitutively aim governed. I focus on the *truth* aim teleological account here (see McHugh 2011 for the claim that the aim of belief is knowledge). This account can be found in early-Velleman (2000), and more recently, in the work of Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen (2006; 2008; 2009; 2011). It has it that 'believing that *p* essentially involves having as an aim to believe *p* truly' (Steglich-Petersen 2009: 395). This aim is realised in one of two ways. In the deliberative case it is realised in the subject's intentions *qua* a believer, and in the non-deliberative case it is realised by 'some subintentional surrogate of such intentions in the form of truth-regulated [...] mechanisms' (Steglich-Petersen 2006: 510). It is then, constitutive of belief that it aims at truth in one of these senses.

It has been claimed that we can explain exclusivity¹ by appeal to the aim of belief: when we deliberate over whether to believe some proposition *p*, exclusivity 'can be explained by the aim one necessarily adopts in posing that question, because the only considerations that could decide whether believing *p* would further that aim are considerations that bear on whether *p* is true' (Steglich-Petersen 2008: 546).

3. The Exclusivity Objection

Owens objects to the truth aim account on the grounds that the putative aim of belief does not cohere with our ordinary notion of aims, since we understand aims as things capable of interacting with and being weighable against each other. This constraint upon aims is derived from the domain of action. The aim one might have with respect to some activity can interact with and be weighed against one's other aims. For example, my aim to run five kilometres this evening is constrained by my aim to finish writing this section before bedtime.

Owens's claim is that this necessary condition on aims is not met by the proposed aim of belief. If it really were the case that I aimed to believe *p* only if *p* were true, then, given the nature of aims, I could weigh my aim to believe truly, against say, my aim to be happy. I might weigh my aim to have a true belief about my spouse's (in)fidelity against my aim to keep peace within the relationship, and, if the latter aim is accorded more weight, I may end up failing to form the belief that my spouse is unfaithful. However, if my deliberation over what to believe is characterised by exclusivity, this kind of weighing is ruled out. When we deliberate over whether to form a belief, we find that we can

only be moved by considerations pertaining to p 's truth, regardless of any other aims we might have when we enter into this process. Owens claims that this exclusion of our other aims which occurs in deliberative belief formation shows that belief is not an aim governed activity; that is, there is no aim of belief.² If there is no aim of belief, we cannot appeal to one in an explanation of exclusivity.

The teleologist who wants to explain exclusivity by appeal to belief having an aim is thus in a bind. On the one hand, if she appeals to aims in any robust sense, she should use that notion in a way at least consistent with our ordinary notion of aims. She should allow for *weighing* the truth aim against other aims one might have.³ However, if she allows for weighing the aim, as our ordinary understanding of aims demands, then she cannot at the same time accept the characterisation of doxastic deliberation as governed by exclusivity. Weighing of aims in deliberation and there being only one kind of consideration that can move us cannot be held together. The teleologist then cannot both explain exclusivity and appeal to an ordinary notion of aims.

4. Denying Exclusivity

McHugh claims that there are three ways the teleologist might respond to Owens's objection. The first is to give an explanation of exclusivity which is compatible with the claim that belief has an aim. The second is to deny that the teleologist is required to explain exclusivity. The third is to deny exclusivity altogether, and give an account of the phenomena which look to indicate exclusivity in terms compatible with the teleological account (McHugh 2012: 436). I put aside the second response, since I am assessing the teleological account with respect to its ability to explain exclusivity. If the teleologist claims that she need not give an explanation of exclusivity, she is not giving an account which needs to be discussed here. With respect to the first kind of response, Steglich-Petersen has argued along these lines (2009). I have argued elsewhere that this response fails (Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof 2013), and so I move now to McHugh's response, a version of the third strategy.

McHugh claims that the 'data that generate the impression of exclusivity can be explained in another way', and that this way is compatible with the claim that the aim of belief can be weighed (McHugh 2012: 436). Instead of exclusivity, we should recognise a feature of the regulation of belief which McHugh calls *demandingness*, which captures the fact that:

you cannot deliberately form an outright belief in a proposition if you regard your evidence for that proposition as less than *sufficient*, where sufficiency involves more than having better or stronger evidence for the proposition than for its negation. You require what you take to be some high degree or strength of evidence, or some particular kind of evidence, for the proposition. (McHugh 2013: 1120)⁴

Exclusivity and demandingness are different phenomena, the latter allows for the kind of weighing which would make coherent the claim that belief is aim governed. McHugh's strategy is to account for the cases in which exclusivity is apparently in play by appeal to the feature of demandingness. If deliberative belief formation is governed by demandingness, the teleologist can claim that belief has a weighable aim. Exclusivity rules out non-evidential considerations being reasons for belief within deliberation, but says nothing about the strength of evidence required to form a belief. Demandingness, on the other hand, allows that non-evidential considerations can be reasons for belief, but it requires that 'if you regard your evidence as insufficient, such considerations cannot effectively motivate you to go ahead and believe' (McHugh 2012: 437; see also 2013: 1121). So if non-evidential considerations have motivational force, if they are derived from some aim, this is one other than the aim of truth (McHugh 2012: 437). Demandingness allows for the aim of belief to interact with other aims when a subject is deliberating over what to believe. If it is demandingness which characterises doxastic deliberation—and not exclusivity—then Owens's challenge is met.

According to McHugh then, what needs explaining is why our deliberative belief formation is characterised by demandingness, and this explanatory work can be done by appeal to belief having an aim. We can explain demandingness by appeal to the aim one adopts when entering doxastic deliberation. One cannot form a belief that *p* deliberatively if one regards the evidence for *p* as less than sufficient, because forming a belief that *p* on less than sufficient evidence is not conducive to the aim one has as a believer. Note the similarity between Steglich-Petersen's explanation of exclusivity, and McHugh's explanation of demandingness. Both explanations go via the aim of belief, with the claim being that the relevant phenomena *follows* from one's adopting that aim in doxastic deliberation.

There are cases in which exclusivity and demandingness make the same prediction. These are ones in which a subject considers whether or not to believe that *p*, and she regards as insufficient both her evidence for *p* and her evidence for $\sim p$. In such cases the subject 'will in effect be forced to withhold belief, no matter how glorious the riches [she is] offered to believe *p* (or $\sim p$), or what other non-evidential considerations are in play' (McHugh 2012: 438). This is a prediction licensed by both exclusivity and demandingness.

What McHugh needs for his claim that doxastic deliberation is characterised by demandingness and not exclusivity are cases in which an appeal to demandingness explains the case, without appeal to exclusivity, or indeed, cases in which it looks like exclusivity is not in play. McHugh offers several cases; I will consider two types of case here, though I take my conclusions about these cases to generalise to his other tokens of the same types of case.

The first type of case is one in which, McHugh claims, you can *withhold* belief for non-evidential reasons: You have a cheque which needs to be cashed by the end of the week. You know it would be easier to cash it on Saturday than today, which is Friday. You also know that the bank has been open on Saturdays before, and so you have sufficient inductive grounds to believe that the bank will be open this

Saturday, even though you cannot rule out the possibility that the bank has changed its opening hours, and so might be closed on Saturday. Though you would usually form the belief that the bank is open, given that the stakes are high in this case, it 'seems that you can, for this reason, withhold belief on the matter, taking seriously the possibility of a change in hours' (McHugh 2013: 1125).

In this case, a subject withholds belief for a non-evidential reason. If deliberative belief formation were characterised by exclusivity, this kind of case would be impossible. Demandingness, however, allows for it.

The second type of case is one in which non-evidential reasons can be taken into account in the formation of a belief: You are a car salesman. You want to sell a particular kind of car, the evidence about which suggests that it is reliable, though you are unable to rule out that it might be an exception in this respect. You know that your sales pitch will be better were you to believe that the car is reliable. In this case, McHugh claims, 'you can take into account the non-evidential reason to form that belief, and form it, putting aside far-fetched error possibilities' (McHugh 2013: 1128). Again, exclusivity denies the possibility of this kind of case, whilst demandingness allows for it.

If it is right that demandingness characterises our deliberation over what to believe, the aim of belief can be weighed in certain circumstances, and so Owens's exclusivity objection is answered. Recall the bind of the teleologist I pointed to at the end of section three: if the teleologist wants to explain exclusivity, she cannot do so by appealing to an aim, since aims are the kinds of thing which can be weighed, something exclusivity rules out. I suggested that the aim theorist cannot both keep exclusivity and the ordinary notion of aims as things which are weighable. McHugh here rejects the first in favour of the second.

5. Reclaiming Exclusivity

Here I suggest that McHugh's cases are not ones in which exclusivity does not hold, and so nor are they ones in which one can weigh the aim of belief. I will resist McHugh's diagnosis of his cases as ones in which the aim of belief is weighed, with practical considerations playing a role, *from the first-person perspective*, in doxastic deliberation. I will then gesture towards an alternative account of what is going on in these cases, one which preserves exclusivity, and Owens's objection to the teleological account.

Before that, I will just register a side note about McHugh's cases: it is odd to call the non-evidential considerations McHugh appeals to *considerations* at all, given that no amount of them can outweigh or make up for evidential shortfalls. Considerations are those things which are taken into account in arriving at a decision, things one *considers* as part of one's deliberation. Take a case where I am deciding whether to finish this paper or read my politics magazine. One set of considerations relate to my research goals for this week, another set of considerations relate to my keeping up with the current political news. Of course considerations of one kind can be far weightier than considerations of another, it might be that I am

particularly invested with keeping up with the political world this week because there is an important election coming up, but if no amount of considerations from the research side could move me to abandon my pursuit for political knowledge, it is not clear that they would represent *considerations* after all. Likewise, in the case of belief, if no amount of McHugh's putative non-evidential considerations could make up for evidential shortfalls, it looks like withholding belief is not a case of weighing pragmatic and epistemic aims. We can see this by looking to the way the aim of truth behaves when it governs guessing, we do not get the kind of result we get in the belief case. Guesses are governed by the aim of truth; the standard of correctness for a guess is truth, and someone cannot be described as guessing if they are not intending to guess truly (Owens 2003: 291). However, it is not the case that evidential considerations always trump non-evidential ones, such that the best we can do is withhold a guess. Consider Owens's case:

Suppose the quiz master asks me whether the earth's population is greater than 7 billion. There is \$1 million at stake. I wouldn't claim to know the answer but no answer means no money. Obviously I ought to make a guess. So I plump for the answer 'yes'. My guess is a sensible one, even though I have no evidence on the matter, because if I don't guess at all I am certain to lose the money. In fact, a guess would be sensible even if I had to get the population of the world to within ten million. Here I'm pretty unlikely to be right but, so far as my evidence goes, any guess I make is as good as any other and I have to make some guess to win. (Owens 2003: 291–2)

Here we have a case in which though truth is the aim of guessing, non-evidential considerations interact with the evidential ones. This of course, *never* happens with belief. All we get in the belief case, supposedly, is our being able to *withhold* belief in light of non-evidential considerations, or go ahead and form the belief we already have sufficient evidence for. But if these non-evidential considerations functioned as *considerations* in any ordinary sense, there ought to be scope for us to do several other things which demandingness rules out. For example, if I had no evidence for *p*, but the practical pay-off for believing that *p* would be huge, I could form the belief that *p*. This is of course ruled out by demandingness, but if that is what characterises our deliberation over what to believe, then why call these non-evidential matters *considerations* at all? ⁵ (Though I will continue to do so for the sake of exposition.) If the reader is unmoved by the concern raised here regarding whether these non-evidential considerations are considerations after all, no matter, since my main argument does not require this claim. It was intended merely as a side note.

McHugh's cases raise the question of what is going on when pragmatic considerations look to be affecting the fixation of belief. My suggestion is that there is no *weighing* of such considerations occurring, and so these cases do not help in a response to Owens. Rather, something else is happening which is consistent with the presence of exclusivity.

We do not need to concede that non-evidential considerations can influence belief formation in the way described, but rather we can understand these

considerations as functioning to modify the standards for sufficient evidence required for belief, and not as reasons for the subject to withhold or form belief. As McHugh notes, exclusivity is silent on the *strength* of evidence required to form a belief, and is concerned only with the type of consideration which can move us in doxastic deliberation (McHugh 2012: 437; 2013: 1121). It is open to the exclusivity proponent to allow non-evidential factors to play a role in the fixation of a belief, this is something everyone recognises (indeed, exclusivity does not even rule out the subject noting that such a thing might be going on! (Archer 2015: 11–12)). Presumably we tell a story like this when we consider cases of, for example, self-deception. The cuckolded husband does not deliberate over whether to believe that his wife is faithful, and consider the fact that believing that she is will make him happy and sustain goodwill in the relationship, but presumably his knowing this plays a causal role in his coming to believe that his wife is faithful, even though there is much evidence against that conclusion. I offer this case to illustrate the kinds of thing that the exclusivity proponent might say about cases in which non-evidential considerations play a role in belief fixation. I see no reason why such things cannot equally be said about McHugh's cases.

What would such a story look like? Well, we might say something like the following: what these practical considerations do is change the standards required to be a believer. So, when the stakes are high, as in the cases McHugh describes, your standards for sufficient evidence are high, and so your being moved to belief requires more or better evidence. The reasons which motivate withholding or forming belief though are purely epistemic, in line with exclusivity.

McHugh canvasses this line of response. In reply he claims that even if practical considerations can affect what counts as sufficient evidence for a subject, this does not show that these considerations cannot motivate a subject, for example, to withhold belief. In fact, what might make a practical consideration a good candidate for a reason one might withhold belief is its playing a role in raising the subject's standard for sufficient evidence (McHugh 2013: 1126). In order for the response to McHugh's cases to be problematic for the way in which he describes them, it would have to be the case that though a practical consideration can raise a subject's standard for sufficient evidence in some contexts, it cannot be recognised as a *reason* for which the subject withholds belief from the deliberative perspective. McHugh suggests that it would be 'puzzling what would be going on' from the subject's point of view in such a case, given that one 'cannot deliberately acknowledge the role of the practical consideration in such events of doxastic rearrangement, and yet there is no change in [the subject's] evidence that could explain them either' (McHugh 2013: 1126). So the claim is that in order for the response to work, it would need to be the case that practical considerations can affect a subject's standard for sufficient evidence, without those considerations functioning as *reasons* for which the subject withholds belief from the deliberative perspective. My claim is that this is exactly right. Non-evidential considerations are not recognised by the subject as *reasons* for withholding belief in certain contexts, but rather, affect the evidential standards required for belief.

Once we distinguish between non-evidential reasons for withholding belief, and the influence of non-evidential factors on standards for belief, we see that the putative cases of demandingness are really cases of exclusivity, and further support the claim that exclusivity characterises our deliberative belief formation. So the way we should understand McHugh's cases is not as cases in which non-evidential factors function as reasons for withholding belief, but rather as cases in which non-evidential factors change what the subject requires as sufficient evidence to form a belief.

Consider Trope and Liberman's (1996) idea of *confidence thresholds* for belief, as one way the exclusivity proponent might develop my alternative explanation of McHugh's cases. The idea here is that the lower a subject's confidence threshold, the less evidence is required to reach the threshold. The *acceptance threshold* is defined as 'the minimum confidence in the truth of a hypothesis that [one] requires before accepting it, rather than continuing to test it' whilst the *rejection threshold* is 'the minimum confidence in the untruth of a hypothesis that [one] requires before rejecting it and discontinuing the test' (Trope and Liberman, 1996: 253). These thresholds depend on 'the cost of false acceptance relative to the cost of information' and 'the cost of false rejection relative to the cost of information' respectively (Trope and Liberman, 1996: 253). By *cost of information* what is meant is the resources and effort that is required for the subject to acquire and process information relevant to the target proposition. By *cost of false acceptance* and *cost of false rejection* what is meant is the subjective importance the subject attaches to avoiding falsely believing a proposition and avoiding falsely believing the negation of a proposition, respectively (Trope and Liberman, 1996: 252). If this model is right, our desires can influence our beliefs, though not in the way that McHugh suggests. Rather, they function to change the thresholds, but are not recognised as *reasons* to withhold belief.

Consider also Jason Stanley's Interest Relative Invariantism about knowledge, to support the claim that it is changes in confidence thresholds which are affected by non-evidential factors which account for McHugh's cases, as opposed to non-evidential factors directly affecting belief formation, functioning as reasons to withhold or form belief. (McHugh himself refers to this sort of account as one which might bolster my line here, (2013: 1134, n. 25).) According to Interest Relative Invariantism

knowing a true proposition requires a subject who believes it to possess a sufficient level of evidence for that proposition, where sufficiency is measured in terms of some kind of probability. The basic idea is that, the greater the practical investment one has in a belief, the stronger one's evidence must be in order to know it. (Stanley 2005: 88)

Stanley also discusses a version of the bank case. When the subject does not have a cheque to cash, she is in a 'Low Stakes' situation, and so the proposition that the bank is open on Saturday does not pose a serious practical question for her. In a 'High Stakes' situation, when the subject has a cheque to cash, the proposition is a serious practical question for her, given that if the proposition is false (if the bank is

not open), the warranted expected utilities of some of the actions at the subject's disposal are affected (namely, the utility of going to the bank on Saturday) (Stanley 2005: 96–7). For Stanley, in a High Stakes case, the subject does not have enough evidence to know the target proposition.

We can understand McHugh's cases in a similar way: the standards required to be a believer are modified according to context. In High Stakes cases, as in the cases McHugh describes, the warranted expected utilities of the subject's actions are affected if she falsely believes, or fails to believe, the target proposition. These are not cases in which non-evidential factors function as reasons in belief formation, but are rather cases in which the subject requires more or less evidence to be a believer. This, of course, does not speak against doxastic deliberation being characterised by exclusivity.

Before concluding, I should note how my argument here relates to a recent paper by Archer (2015). I have argued that when non-evidential factors play a role in belief formation, they do not do so by functioning as reasons for belief from the first-person perspective, but rather function to change the standards required for being a believer in a given context. In her paper, Archer makes several points, most relevant here is her denial of McHugh's assumption that 'evidence can be sufficient to enable but not compel belief', and she thus denies the very possibility of McHugh's cases (Archer 2015: 7). Archer's line here might usefully be plugged into my own argument: the non-evidential factors could function to set the standards for sufficient evidence, such that there *could be no cases of sufficient evidence without belief*, as Archer avers. That said, Archer's denial of the possibility of McHugh's cases is not required for my argument, and so I do not myself commit to it. It might be that McHugh's cases are possible, that there can be sufficient evidence without belief, but that nevertheless, where non-evidential factors play a role, they do not do so *as reasons* for believing, but rather set the standards for sufficiency. In contrast to Archer then, I am agnostic as to the possibility of McHugh's cases, but suggest that, whether or not one can have what one considers sufficient evidence for *p* without thereby believing that *p*, the role of non-evidential factors in such cases is not as McHugh claims. Exclusivity holds.

6. Conclusion

I argued that it has not been shown that demandingness characterises deliberative formation, since McHugh's cases can be characterised as ones in which non-evidential factors influence the standards of evidence required to be a believer, but do not enter doxastic deliberation *as* considerations which are weighed in the fixation or withholding of belief. Owens's Exclusivity objection demonstrates that the teleologist cannot both appeal to an ordinary notion of aims, *and* explain exclusivity by appeal to the aim of belief. I conclude that the strategy pursued by McHugh—that of denying exclusivity in favour of demandingness, where the latter is consistent with the aim of belief being weighed—does not work. Owens's objection thus remains unanswered; there is no aim of belief.⁶

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NOTES

¹ Steglich-Petersen offers this as an explanation of Transparency, which is the collapsing of the question *whether to believe that p* into the question *whether p is true* in doxastic deliberation (see Shah 2003: 447). Given that Transparency entails exclusivity, it is legitimate here to take the explanation of the former to encompass the latter.

² We might only get something weaker from Owens's argument: it might be that there is no *truth* aim of belief. There might be some other aim which is weighable. However, it is enough for my purposes to show that there is no aim in the way teleological theorists have supposed, that is, there is no aim which can be appealed to in order to explain exclusivity.

³ A possible response at this point is to put pressure on the claim that aims are necessarily weighable, which would allow for an aim of belief even though it cannot be weighed. Here is not the space to give a full account of aims and the conditions thereon; I just make two quick points. First, in response to Owens, teleologists have gone one of two ways: they either say that aims can be weighed, and this weighing occurs with respect to whether to take up the aim in the first place (Steglich-Petersen 2009, see Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof 2013 for a response). Or they say that the aim can be weighed, and this occurs in deliberation itself, since exclusivity does not characterise all such deliberation (McHugh 2012; 2013). Teleologists then have not so far taken issue with Owens's characterisation of aims as necessarily weighable, and this might be suggestive of such a route being an unproductive one. Second, all other aims can, at least in principle, be weighed. Even aims which might structure most of our activities and ones we are loathe to give up, can, in the right circumstances, be weighed against our other aims (e.g., weighing our aim of remaining alive against our aim to protect a child). So if the teleologist wanted to respond to Owens's problem by claiming that belief does have an aim even though it cannot be weighed, then she will have to concede that this is different from any other aim, along at least this dimension. Perhaps that is a tolerable cost, but the teleologist at the very least owes us an account of what makes it an aim, and why it is different from all other aims. I suspect that answering these questions may well put pressure on whether talk of aims can be anything but metaphorical, as is Owens's original concern.

⁴ An almost identical definition of demandingness is given elsewhere (see McHugh 2012: 436); the difference is the absence of 'outright'. I opt for the 2013 definition here to put aside complications arising from degrees of belief.

⁵ Sophie Archer makes a similar point in her defence of exclusivity (Archer 2015: 9).

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